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Better than Words: Expressing Feelings with Foods in Mass Observation Wartime Diaries¹

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Abstract

This paper, based on the examination of selected wartime diaries from the Mass Observation Archive, tackles the expression of intimate feelings through food practices. Exploring personal testimonies, this paper presents how, during a time of scarcity and shortage, food becomes a precious accessory to express personal feelings and a supportive medium to demonstrate love or friendship to friends or loved ones, whomever and wherever they could be. The result of this exploration, supported by various studies and reports on wartime emotions and human behaviours, shows how personal feelings were expressed by something better than words: valuable food. It also demonstrates to what extent the smallest emotional boundary can become vital when facing hard times through some examples of quite peculiar behaviours reported by the diarists. From the gift of a piece of cheese to the sacrifice of the meat ration, this paper suggests that food practices can become a valuable indicator of personal feelings such as love and friendship, but also loneliness and anxiety.

As a PhD student in History at the University of Sussex, I study the changes induced by the war in the diet and eating habits of British civilians, especially the middle-classes, through Mass Observation Archive materials, in particular wartime diaries. While examining these diaries, I noticed the importance of giving food to express feelings. People showed their affection by giving food as a present, sometimes sacrificing a surplus, but sometimes depriving themselves, even on occasions for their pets. Curious to find out what could be hidden behind such behaviours, and what it could tell us about the emotions of these civilians, I pursued my research in Mass Observation reports and various other publications, including studies on the significance of gifts, wartime loneliness or human-pet relationships.¹ Therefore, this paper is based on multi-disciplinary materials, in addition to the wartime diaries examined: namely seven diaries selected because of their significant mentions of food. Other examples of food received or given were found in the diary of Nella Last and in *'Domestic soldiers'*, Jennifer Purcell's study of the wartime lives of six female Mass Observation diarists.²

The diarists considered were six women (three single, two married and one widow; three with children, three without) and one man (married with children). Two women were upper-middle class; three were middle-middle class and one

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lower-middle class while the man was upper-working class. Based on various studies of social classes, the determination of the social group membership of the diarists was made through the information gathered from their diaries and from various replies to monthly questionnaires from Mass Observation about their occupation, income, education, interests, standards of living, and sometimes from their own words.³ This predominance of middle-class is quite representative of the Mass Observers but, at least for this specific study, cannot be linked with a cultural determination of food gifts.⁴ Whether upper or lower-middle class, all the diarists gave or received presents of food; the social class and its 'unequal access to food' (to quote Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska) being significant for the potential value (imported goods vs. home grown vegetables for instance) of the gift, not on the process of giving it.⁵

I argue that during the war, food, which was scarce, became a valuable medium to express feelings such as love, friendship or concern.⁶ This thesis is supported by studies on the significance of gift giving in human societies.⁷ But I also believe that on a deeper level, some of the behaviours related in the diaries are a good indicator of emotions such as anxiety or loneliness and demonstrate the importance of emotional bonds when facing distressing times.

Concerning the food situation of the diarists, it must be said that between shortage, rationing and the disappearance of many food items, the possibility to get usual pre-war commodities changed drastically.⁸ Rationing was meant to avoid inflation, prevent shortages and also prevent discontent amongst the population by providing an equitable distribution of the food supplies.⁹ Beginning in January 1940 with butter, sugar, bacon and ham, shortly followed by meat in March and tea, margarine, and cooking fat in July, rationing was extended to preserves and cheese in 1941.¹⁰ Other commodities such as vegetables or fruits were not rationed, but due to the efforts made to spare room in ships, their importation was very limited. To quote Robert Mackay: 'with food imports down by half, and the remaining half concentrated on basic foods [...] some exotic foods simply disappeared [...] others appeared very occasionally at exotic prices'.¹¹

Less exotic commodities were difficult to get too. Eggs for instance were put into a distribution scheme (with various entitlements related to availability) in 1941.¹² In theory everyone received one egg per week. In practice, shell eggs became rare and, unless keeping poultry, were very often replaced by dried ones. In order to calm the population's discontentment, many unrationed commodities such as dried fruits, nuts, or tinned foods were put on the point system in December 1941.¹³ Nevertheless, most were still hard to get.¹⁴ The testimonies found in the

diaries confirm that many food items disappeared, deteriorated, became scarce and were missed. Missed, but also given and received:

‘James came home today, bringing me a present of a piece of Cheshire cheese and a small onion’¹⁵

A young woman, recently married, wrote this sentence in October 1941. In January 1942, she mentions on two occasions her husband, James, coming back from work with ‘the present of six eggs’.¹⁶ A very special gift, not only because she was very fond of eggs, but also because shell eggs were in short supply and consequently very valuable. She also writes how, for their last breakfast together before the departure of James for his Army training, she cooked eggs and bacon ‘she had kept preciously for the occasion’.¹⁷ It was a particularly special breakfast that day, as due to rationing eggs *and* bacon were a rarity for them; they usually had porridge for breakfast.¹⁸ Throughout the war, in addition to cheese, onion and eggs, her husband continued to show his love not only with letters and words, but by sending parcels from India, where he was based, full of delights such as sugar, syrup, dried fruits, sweets and even tinned butter.¹⁹ Such presents were ‘very welcome’ and helped the diarist to cope with what she called her ‘James-less-ness’, a feeling which usually brought her to tears. The expression of their love is not conveyed only through gifts of food, but the emphasis given to these in her diary shows the importance they had for her, not for their nutritious benefit – she often shared the food with James’s parents – but for the emotional one.

She is not the only one. Purcell quotes another diarist who, facing the news of her son being missing in action, describes having been cheered up by receiving a parcel of food from a family in South Africa.²⁰ It is not said if the comfort came from the food or from the family support, nevertheless the tea, sugar, chocolate and raisins received were important enough to be mentioned despite such a distressing time.

Many other mentions of ‘affectionate’ food are present in the diaries examined: a favourite dish for her son’s birthday by Nella Last,²¹ a Swiss roll given as a birthday present by a friend,²² a grandmother giving her eggs and sweets to her grand-children,²³ or a neighbour supporting a diarist coming back from hospital.²⁴ Sometimes less common gifts are mentioned too, as in the case of one couple giving ‘six of their precious eggs’ to friends as a birthday present. Such a gift was significant for them. This family of four may have had chicken, but they did struggle with money.²⁵ In December 1942, the same diarist made a Christmas gift of fourteen eggs to his shift, ‘one egg for each member of their family’. They also spared their eggs to give them to friends for Christmas. As for him, he received from his friends a ‘very pleasant gift of several toilet soaps, some cigarettes and a

pot of marmalade'.²⁶ A significant present too: between sugar rationing and the quasi disappearance of oranges, marmalade was quite a luxury.

There are many other mentions of food given in the diaries. For instance a woman whose family has a farm and hunting land mentions regularly sending parcels of food, bringing food when visiting or offering it to a visitor. These gifts include vegetables and fruits from the farm, but also olive oil, tinned foods or meat shared from the hunting.²⁷ Another diarist mentions sending eggs to his sister in law every month while another one wrote about sending a 'huge amount of cheese to a friend'. In that case, some personal motivations were involved, as this very upper-middle class woman 'cannot bear the stuff'. Nevertheless, she did pay for the cheese as well as for the postage and made the effort to send it to her friend.²⁸

Sending parcels of food to family or friends was quite common, even without a war going on, but it takes on another dimension when it involves a personal sacrifice and the privation of some essential commodities. For instance a mother sending food to her son in the Forces, on his request, who deprives herself of her rations of sugar, jam, biscuits and tinned meat, unwisely according to the diarist reporting it, who wrote about the troops receiving adequate food and civilians having difficulties. However, the mother in question seems to find that perfectly normal.²⁹ Other sacrifices of food were perceived as normal or were expected, such as parents giving their sweets ration, milk ration or any fruits they got to their children.³⁰ But occasionally less expected behaviours are mentioned, as in the related story of Marge, visiting six shops to find a Canterbury milk chocolate bar, as 'Doddy' was used to having one every day and declined any other brand. He was also used to having six eggs every week, to having his biscuits buttered and to getting liver on a daily basis, so Marge gave him most of her meat rations too. The puzzling point here is not the sacrifice, it is the fact that 'Doddy' was not Marge's husband, son or even lover; 'Doddy' was Marge's dog.

There are other mentions of dog owners sacrificing their meat ration for their pets and the diarist relating these stories is not especially critical about a behaviour which can be considered as unreasonable. It is maybe due to the fact that she spends hours, literally, collecting dandelion seeds for Dick, her canary. Like other bird owners, she faced great difficulties finding bird seed, which was not imported anymore. Feeding her canary is an important issue for this diarist. In fact, while the young wife mentions her husband quite often, this diarist, a woman in her late thirties, single, living with her mother and brother, does write regularly about her canary, expressing her worries about feeding him and explaining how she tries to find seed substitutes.³¹

Such behaviours from a parent or a lover are quite understandable. But the sacrifice of meat rations, sweet rations or even taking so much time to feed a pet raises some questions. Indeed, at least for dogs, Mass Observation had some questions too and set up two surveys on the topic. According to the 1945 survey, only a relatively small number (15%) of the people interviewed put their dog to sleep because of war difficulties. Others said that they were ready to make sacrifices for their dog, considering that they were worth it.³² This reflects the results of the 1941 survey which showed a significant number of dog owners, especially women (50% of the women interviewed vs. 28% of the men) expressing an increased attachment to their dog. Women were also more likely to stress the importance of the dog as a family member, a companion and the importance of keeping it. A ‘pro-dogism’ described to be ‘largely emotional’ and ‘a good measure of the increase of women loneliness and of the function of dog as a companion’.³³

This companionship is not unusual. Researchers in psychology such as Archer and Zasloff³⁴ have demonstrated that the bonds between humans and animals can be very strong, especially for people with fewer social interactions.³⁵ In addition, medical researchers such as Walsh or Friedman have established the positive impact of animals on human health, physical and mental, as pets are good buffers to stressful events and help their owners to cope with anxiety and loneliness; two emotions common at the time, as argued by Vormbrock or Duval working on wartime separations.³⁶ According to Duval’s survey on the feelings of soldier’s wives in the USA published in 1945, the main problem expressed was loneliness. Nearly 50% of the women interviewed stated feeling considerable or extreme loneliness and about 40% described their loneliness as moderate.³⁷ Their testimonies echo the diary of the young wife after her husband’s departure for the war. She writes about her first day alone, a long day, and the following nights, when she wanted to be asleep, ‘to not think about feeling lonely’.³⁸ Other mentions are made about her loneliness, especially at the end of the war, when after nearly four years of separation the return was postponed, again and again, as the demobilisation took more and more time.³⁹ For this young wife, as for the ones of the American survey, the separation had important impacts including nervousness, insomnia, losing weight and depression. She associates all these feelings to her “James-less-ness” and, as mentioned, expresses being comforted by her husband’s letters, but also by the joy felt when receiving a parcel from India.

To conclude, the examination of non-verbalized behaviours in the diaries tells us a lot about civilians’ intimacy and wartime experiences. In this case, the use of food as a medium to express feelings suggests that some civilians, if not most, faced quite a hard time, emotionally speaking, at some point or another during the war.

The sharing, or even sacrifice of food for others, human or not, illustrate their importance for those giving away eggs, cheese, meat and sweets. It also shows a way to demonstrate love, friendship and concern with something more valuable, more concrete, than words. This is not to say that cooking a favourite meal for a child's birthday or giving food as a gift was a 'wartime' new trend. What is important here is the value of the present made at the time and what it tells us about these people. For instance, it is my opinion that the increased importance of dogs for their owners, to such a level, and such a gendered basis, added to the importance of the sacrifice of food mentioned in the diaries, is the expression of these people's loneliness, anxiety and their emotional way to cope with it.⁴⁰

It is interesting to notice that there is not much about men and their emotions in the studies examined, which raises questions about the perception of gender when talking about feelings and opens the door to further research.⁴¹ However, women were not the only ones to demonstrate their concerns with food. In addition to the husband sending parcels from India, the only male diarist presented did offer his precious eggs to people he cared for and received marmalade from his male friends. This could be seen as a confirmation of the use of food, maybe sometimes the only valuable thing to give, to express fondness without using words.

Of course, it would be unwise to make a generality from the examination of seven diaries, even if supported by various studies. Not all dog owners, wives or mothers felt the same and further research must be done to confirm this argument. Nevertheless, at least for these diarists and I believe for many other people, it can be said that food became a valuable medium to express themselves, at a time when a piece of cheese and a small onion were better than words to say 'I love you'.

Endnotes

- ¹ For more on the history of emotion, start with S. Matt. 'Current Emotion Research in History: Or, Doing History from the Inside Out', in *Emotion Review* Vol. 3, No. 1 (2011), pp. 117–124.
- ² N. Last. *Nella Last's War: The Second World War Diaries of "Housewife, 49"* (London: Profile Books, 2006); J. Purcell. *Domestic Soldiers* (London: Constable, 2011).
- ³ See, for instance: R. Lewis and A. Maude. *The English Middle Classes* (London: Penguin Books, 1953); R. MacKibbin. *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); S. Gunn and R. Bell. *Middle Classes: Their Rise and Sprawl* (London: Cassell, 2002); M. Savage. 'Changing Social Class Identities in Post-War Britain: Perspectives from Mass-Observation', in *Sociological Research Online* Vol. 12, No. 3 (2007); W.A. Armstrong. 'The use of Information about Occupation', in E. A. Wrigley (ed.). *Nineteenth-century society: essays in the use of quantitative methods for the study of social data* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).
- ⁴ See Savage, 'Changing Social Class', pp. 459–465.
- ⁵ I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska. 'Fair Shares? The limits of Food Policy in Britain during the Second World War' in *Food and War in Twentieth Century Europe* (Ashgate, 2011), pp. 127–128.
- ⁶ See for instance: J. Lipman-Blumen. 'A Crisis Framework Applied to Macrosociological Family Changes: Marriage, Divorce, and Occupational Trends Associated with World War II', in *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (1975), pp. 889–901.
- ⁷ T.I. Garner and J. Wagner, 'Economic Dimensions of Household Gift Giving', in *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1991); A. Komter and W. Vollebergh. 'Gift Giving and the Emotional Significance of Family and Friends', in *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (1997), pp. 747–757; B. Schwartz. 'The Social Psychology of the Gift', in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (1967).
- ⁸ An adult weekly ration would be 4oz (113gr) of bacon and ham, between 2 and 3 pints of milk, 2oz (56gr) of butter, between 1 and 4 oz (28 to 113gr) of cheese, 8 oz (226gr) of sugar, 2 oz (56gr) of tea and a monthly ration of 12oz (340gr) of sweet. A. Calder. *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), pp. 380-381.
- ⁹ R. Mackay. *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain During the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 38, 196.
- ¹⁰ I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska. *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 17–18.
- ¹¹ Mackay, *Half the Battle*, p. 110.
- ¹² Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Fair Shares?', p. 126.
- ¹³ An extension of the rationing permitting to stabilise the supply and demand and complement rations, set up in December 1941. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, p. 19.
- ¹⁴ Purcell, *Domestic Soldiers*, p. 90.
- ¹⁵ Mass Observation Archive (hereafter MOA), D 5239 October 1941.
- ¹⁶ MOA, D 5239 January 1942.
- ¹⁷ MOA, D 5239 December 1942.
- ¹⁸ MOA, D 5239 May 1942.
- ¹⁹ MOA, D 5239 October 1943; February 1944; December 1944.
- ²⁰ Purcell, *Domestic Soldiers*, p. 184.
- ²¹ Last, *Nella Last's War*, p. 59.
- ²² MOA, D 5390 March 1941.
- ²³ MOA, D 5201 August 1941.
- ²⁴ MOA, D 5240 October 1942.
- ²⁵ MOA, D 5201 January 1942; D 5201 March 1942; D 5201 May 1941.
- ²⁶ MOA, D 5201 December 1942.
- ²⁷ MOA, D 5378 December 1943; D 5378 January 1941; January 1943.
- ²⁸ MOA, D 5201 January 1943; D 5427 November 1942.
- ²⁹ MOA, D 5390 February 1945.
- ³⁰ MOA, D 5201 November 1942; D 5318 1 July 1942.
- ³¹ MOA, D 5390 September 1940; D 5390 March 1941; D 5390 February 1941.
- ³² MOA, FR 2256, 'Dogs health', June 1945, pp. 7, 11.
- ³³ MOA, FR 804, 'Dogs in London' July 1941, pp. 1, 6.

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- ³⁴ J. Archer. 'Why Do People Love Their Pets?' in *Ethology and Sociobiology*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1997), p. 237; R. Lee Zasloff and A. H. Kidd. 'Loneliness and Pet Ownership Among Single Women', in *Psychological Reports* Vol. 75, No. 2 (1994), p. 747.
- ³⁵ This point is of interest to understand the new importance taken their dog for their owners. According to a report about the changes in habits due to the war made in July 1941 one of the significant changes mentioned, especially by women, was a decrease on social life and interactions due to transport difficulties, the blackout, more work or staying more at home. MOA, FR 808, 'Change in habits due to war', July 1941.
- ³⁶ F. Walsh. 'Human-animal Bonds I: The Relational Significance of Companion Animals', in *Family Process* Vol. 48, No. 4 (2009), pp. 462–80; E.M. Duvall. 'Loneliness and the Serviceman's Wife', in *Marriage and Family Living* Vol. 7, No. 4 (1945), pp. 77–81; E. Friedmann and H. Son, 'The Human-Companion Animal Bond: How Humans Benefit', in *The Veterinary Clinics of North America. Small Animal Practice* Vol. 39, No. 2 (2009), p. 293; Erika Friedmann, Heesook Son and Chia-Chun Tsai. 'The Animal/human Bond-6: health and Wellness' (2010); J. Vormbrock. 'Attachment Theory as Applied to Wartime and Job-related Marital Separation', in *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 114, No. 1 (1993), pp. 122–144; Duvall, 'Loneliness and the Serviceman's Wife', pp. 77–81.
- ³⁷ Duvall, 'Loneliness and the Serviceman's Wife', p. 78.
- ³⁸ MOA, D 5239 November 1942.
- ³⁹ MOA, D 5239 1945.
- ⁴⁰ See for instance: M. Shapira. 'The Psychological Study of Anxiety in the Era of the Second World War', in *20th Century British History* Vol. 24, No. 1 (2013), pp. 31–57.
- ⁴¹ For further reading, see: Linda Brannon. *Gender: Psychological Perspectives* (Boston: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon, 2004), Chapter 7; Francesca M. Cancian. 'The Feminization of Love', in *Feminist Frontiers*. 3 / [a Cura Di] Laurel Richardson and Verta Taylor (1993).